Why GAO Did This Study

Government functions and effective disaster response and management rely on the ability of national security and emergency preparedness (NS/EP) personnel to communicate. The Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) National Communications System (NCS), is responsible for ensuring continuity of NS/EP communications when network congestion or damage occurs. As requested, GAO assessed the (1) priority communication programs NCS provides, how it enlists subscribers, and to what extent NCS controls access to these programs; (2) challenges that can affect delivery of these programs; and (3) extent to which NCS plans for and evaluates its services. GAO reviewed NCS program documents, such as annual reports and access control procedures and data on program subscribers. GAO also interviewed officials from NCS and select state and local government entities. GAO compared NCS performance measures to federal best practices.

What GAO Recommends

Among other things, GAO recommends the Manager of NCS (1) define program capabilities, costs, and mitigation plans as part of NCS's acquisition planning for enhanced NS/EP communications services; (2) incorporate strategic planning best practices as NCS finalizes its strategic plan; and (3) strengthen NCS's performance measurement. DHS agreed with our recommendations. DHS's detailed comments and GAO's response are included in the report.

View GAO-09-822 or key components.
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EMERGENCY COMMUNICATIONS

National Communications System Provides Programs for Priority Calling, but Planning for New Initiatives and Performance Measurement Could Be Strengthened

What GAO Found

NCS has two programs to provide NS/EP personnel with priority calling service when telephone networks are congested or damaged—the Government Emergency Telecommunications Service (GETS) and the Wireless Priority Service (WPS). NCS has undertaken several efforts, such as outreach at industry conferences, to increase participation in and control access to these programs. According to NCS, though outreach efforts have helped to increase overall enrollment, it is working to further address possible cost barriers to participation in WPS, such as discussing options with wireless carriers to help defray costs. In addition, NCS has implemented policies and procedures to ensure that access to its priority programs are limited to authorized users. GAO's review of select GETS and WPS subscriber data revealed that, of the 85 records we examined, NCS generally followed its policies and procedures to limit GETS and WPS access to authorized subscribers.

NCS is taking steps to address inherent challenges in the communications environment—such as network congestion. For example, NCS initiated a satellite pilot program to allow NS/EP officials to circumvent severely damaged or congested traditional telephone networks. However, methods for implementation and evaluation of the pilot were unclear and NCS subsequently terminated the pilot. NCS is also working to provide priority voice and data NS/EP communications as part of the evolving telecommunications networks, but it has not finalized an acquisition approach based on available technologies, costs, or plans to mitigate technological and other challenges to deliver such capabilities. The lack of this information has led to congressional restrictions on NCS's funding. As NCS attempts to ensure that GETS and WPS services can operate in these evolving networks, an acquisition approach that includes this information will provide NCS officials and Congress with essential information to most effectively allocate resources and guide decision making.

Although DHS agreed with GAO's June 2008 recommendation to complete the NCS strategic plan, NCS has not finalized its strategic plan which has been under development since 2007. Furthermore, existing performance measures do not cover all of its core responsibilities, as suggested by best practices, and certain performance measures could be strengthened. For example, NCS does not have a measure to gauge its performance in two of its key federal roles—critical infrastructure protection for communications under DHS's National Infrastructure Protection Plan as well as coordinating communications issues under the National Response Framework. Furthermore, NCS does not use prior years' enrollment levels to help determine increases, if any, to be made to future year's goals for user enrollment. Fully and accurately measuring performance is critical to ensuring the agency and key stakeholders—such as Congress—base program and resource decisions on actual performance.

_____ **United States Government Accountability Office**